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## JOHN MILTON'S HISTORY OF BRITAIN ITS PLACE IN ENGLISH HISTORIOGRAPHY

by Michael Landon

*The History of Britain, that part especially now called England, from the first traditional Beginning continued to the Norman Conquest*, by John Milton, was written at intervals between 1646 and 1660 and was first published in 1670 by James Allestry in a quarto volume of some three hundred and fifty pages which sold for five shillings.<sup>1</sup>

Few think of Milton as a historian, although anyone familiar with *Paradise Lost* alone of his best known works will realize that the famous mid-seventeenth century poet knew and had a profound sense of history.<sup>2</sup> His *History of Britain* has tended to be neglected by Milton scholars and has not as yet been critically edited, though it soon will be.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the work is worthy of study for the light that it sheds on its author's political writings and on his poetry, for the further insight that it gives into his character and intellectual development, and because, in itself, it "is a work of learning and originality, worthy to be remembered in any account of the development of historical writing in England."<sup>4</sup>

The work apparently had its origins in Milton's search for a theme for that great epic or dramatic poem that from his youth he had intended should be his major contribution to English poetry. Notes made in his Commonplace Book in that period, from 1632 to 1638, between his leaving Cambridge and his going to Italy indicate that he was carefully reading the works of the Elizabethan chroniclers, Ralph Holinshed and John Stow, as well as the *History of Great Britain* by John Speed, published in 1611,

<sup>1</sup>C. H. Firth, "Milton as an Historian," *British Academy Proceedings* (1907-08), pp. 227, 229-30; *British Museum Catalogue* CLX (1963), column 994.

<sup>2</sup>E.g. *Paradise Lost* I:351-55, X:306-11, XIII:505-40; ed. M. Y. Hughes, *John Milton-complete poems and major prose* (New York: Odyssey Press, 1957).

<sup>3</sup>In *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton* (Yale Series, ed. Don M. Wolfe).

<sup>4</sup>Firth, p. 227.

and the works of several foreign historians.<sup>5</sup> He was evidently attracted by the legendary foundation of Britain, in 1108 B.C., by a group of refugees from Troy led by one Brutus, after whom the island was supposed to have been named, and his Italian wife Inogene, and by the legendary activities of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table, for in 1639, in the Latin verse written in memory of his friend Diodate, *Damon's Epitaph*, he wrote:

I, for my part, am resolved to tell the story of the Trojan ships in the Rutupian sea [Thames estuary] and of the ancient kingdom of Inogene . . . . Then I shall tell of Igraine pregnant with Arthur by fatal deception, the counterfeiting of Gorlois features and arms by Merlin's treachery.<sup>6</sup>

And in another Latin verse in the same year, the *Epistle to Manso*, he expressed the same ambition:

if ever I shall summon back our native kings into our songs, and Arthur, waging his wars beneath the earth, or if ever I shall proclaim the magnanimous heroes of the table which their mutual fidelity made invincible, and (if only the spirit be with me) shall shatter the Saxon phalanxes under the British Mars!<sup>7</sup>

In 1642, in *The Reason of Church-government urg'd against Prelaty*, we find him pondering as to whether he should write an "Epick" poem in the manner of Homer, Virgil and Tasso or a drama following the strict rules of Aristotle or perhaps following only the dictates of nature "which in them that know art, and use judgment is no transgression, but an enriching of art." and last "what K. [sic] or Knight before the conquest might be chosen to lay the pattern of a Christian *Heroe*."<sup>8</sup>

In 1640 Milton had in fact jotted down on a piece of paper ninety-nine possible subjects with brief notes as to how they should be handled. Of these sixty were scriptural subjects and thirty-eight from British history. All of the latter were taken from the period between the Roman conquest (45 A.D.) and the

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup>Hughes, p. 137.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 130

<sup>8</sup>John Mitford, ed. *The Works of John Milton* (London: W. Pickering, 1863), III:145.

Norman conquest (1066). It was from one of the scriptural subjects, the tragedy of "Adam Unparadised," that Milton was ultimately to create his *magnum opus*; from the thirty-eight British historical subjects came the *History of Britain*.<sup>9</sup>

Down to the beginning of the fifteenth century the writing of history in England had been confined to monks who, in the seclusion of their cells, recopied old histories and chronicled in Latin the doings of the contemporary world beyond their cloisters as they heard them from the lips of travellers, and who sought to show in their chronicles the hand of God at work in the affairs of men. But in the fifteenth century, with the rise of English nationalism resulting from the hundred years war of aggression against France, there came to be a demand for a more colourful type of history appealing to the popular taste and written in the vernacular tongue. Well-suited to this taste were the legends, referred to above, of Brutus and the Trojan founders of Britain and of King Arthur and his knights, which had originated in the fertile imaginations of the writers of England's first "Augustan" age, the period of the classical revival under Henry II in the mid-twelfth century. Specifically they were given to the world by the cleric, courtier and scholar, Geoffrey of Monmouth, who in his *Historia Regum Britanniae* (ca. 1140) provided Englishmen with antecedents as distinguished as those which Virgil had furnished for Augustan Rome. These legends, mostly imaginary but perhaps partly inspired by some now-lost Breton folktales,<sup>10</sup> provided much of the material for *Brut* and Higden's *Polychronicon* both of which were published by William Caxton and ran through several editions.<sup>11</sup>

At this time, however, in the universities of renaissance Italy a new, critical approach to history, dedicated to impartiality and the cause of truth, was being developed. This new spirit came to England with Polydore Vergil, an alumnus of the universities of Bologna and Padua, who served as Papal Collector at the courts of Henry VII and Henry VIII and who eventually settled down in England.

Vergil's *Anglica Historia*, dedicated to Henry VIII in 1533 and first published in Basel in 1534,<sup>12</sup> is generally regarded, though

<sup>9</sup>Firth, p. 229.

<sup>10</sup>*Dictionary of National Biography* (sub Geoffrey of Monmouth).

<sup>11</sup>Denys Hays, ed. *The Anglica Historia of Polydore Vergil* (Camden Society, 1950), Introduction, p. xxv.

<sup>12</sup>*DNB* (sub Polydore Vergil).

it was never published in England, even partially, before the nineteenth century,<sup>13</sup> as marking the beginning of modern English historiography. Writing in Latin because he was aiming at an international audience, Vergil's avowed object "was to tell the truth and nothing but the truth."<sup>14</sup> The stories of Brutus and King Arthur, emanating from the pen of that English Vergil, Geoffrey of Monmouth, were subjected to "a devastating historical analysis" by this latter-day Italian Vergil, who was not able, however, totally to demolish them but was forced to conclude with the Scottish verdict of "not proven."<sup>15</sup>

Vergil's *Historia* was widely read in England in the later sixteenth century but was at the same time highly unpopular. This unpopularity was due to two factors: first, that the author was a Catholic priest and, second, its rough handling of the Brutus and Arthur legends. Both were very provoking to the nationalist sentiment which grew more exuberant towards the end of the century as England emerged triumphant over the double threat of Catholic and Spanish domination.<sup>16</sup> The Elizabethan chroniclers Holinshed (1578) and Stow (1565) wrote in English and retained the legends without criticism. William Camden, whose *Britannia* was published in Latin in 1607, and who is generally regarded as the first great modern native-English historian, noted that Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History* was "yet of little authority among Learned Men,"<sup>17</sup> but considered that "absolutely to reject it would be to war against Time and to fight against a received Opinion."<sup>18</sup> He confessed that he himself believed in the legends but devoted four pages to setting out the best scholarly arguments against their validity.<sup>19</sup>

Camden's history is most noted for its thorough use of the new scientific techniques which had been evolved, as noted above, in renaissance Italy and which had been most thoroughly set-forth by John Bodin of the University of Toulouse, which had many connections with Italy, in his *Method for the Easy Comprehension of History* (1565). In Chapter II of this work Bodin stressed the importance of geography to a proper understanding of history.

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<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup>Hays, p. xxviii.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, p. xxiv.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, p. xxxiv.

<sup>17</sup>Wm. Camden, *Britannia*, ed. Edmund Gibson (London, 1722), author's preface, p. vi.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. vii-xi.

"For such," he says, "is the relationship and affinity to history that the one seems to be a part of the other."<sup>20</sup> In his fifth chapter he advised the historian to take into account not only geography but also the influences of astrology, climate and racial characteristics upon the affairs of men.<sup>21</sup> In 1605, in his *Advancement of Learning*, the English scholar Francis Bacon had also stressed the importance of geographic and cosmographic history and claimed that his age, at long last, possessed the necessary knowledge to write it:

being compounded of natural history in respect of the regions themselves; of history civil, in respect of the habitations, regiments, and manners of the people; and the mathematics, in respect of the climates and configurations towards the heavens: which part of learning of all in this latter time hath obtained most proficience.<sup>22</sup>

Camden brought not only what were called in the seventeenth century the "chorographic" sciences: topography, cosmography and geography, to his study of early English history but also the science of linguistics, having prepared himself for his task by learning, as best he could in that age, Anglo-Saxon and Welsh.<sup>23</sup>

Milton used as sources for his *History of Britain* the classical Latin historians, the medieval monkish chroniclers, and such predecessors as Polydore Vergil, Holinshed, Speed, Stow and Camden. C. H. Firth, himself one of the greatest historians of his age, in his lecture on "Milton as an Historian" delivered before the British Academy in November, 1908,<sup>24</sup> said of Milton's use of his sources: "he might have been writing in the nineteenth rather than the seventeenth century. For his conclusions are roughly those of modern scholars, and his reasoning practically that of a scientific historian."<sup>25</sup>

There could be no greater praise from a nineteenth century historian. For "scientific" accuracy was the chief concern of nineteenth century history. Under the influence of Leopold von Ranke

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<sup>20</sup>Ed. Beatrice Reynolds (New York: Columbia University Press, 1945), p. 25.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 148-51.

<sup>22</sup>As quoted by J. R. Bryant jr., "Milton and the Art of History," *Philological Quarterly*, XXIX:27.

<sup>23</sup>Camden, Editor's introduction.

<sup>24</sup>See note 1, *supra*.

<sup>25</sup>Firth, pp. 236-37.

and other German scholars it sought to liberate history from all myth, fantasy, inaccuracy or even utility. "To history," said Ranke,

has been assigned the office of judging the past, of instructing the present for the benefit of future ages. To such high offices . . . [it] . . . does not aspire: It wants only to show what actually happened (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*).<sup>26</sup>

Milton, in fact, showed himself concerned with "what actually happened" but he hardly limited himself to the ideal extent demanded by the nineteenth century in scope and purpose and he scarcely showed the same laudable devotion for digging down to the ultimate truth of the past. Faced right at the beginning with the perennial problem of the validity of the Brutus legends he ended up sitting on the fence.

That which we have of old seeming, hath by the greater part of judicious Antiquaries bin long rejected for a modern Fable.

Nevertheless there being others . . . men not unread, nor unlearned in Antiquitie, who admitt that for approved story, which the former explode for fiction, and seeing that oft-times reelations heretofore accounted fabulous have bin after found to contain in them many foot-steps, and reliques of something true, . . . I have therefore determin'd to bestow the telling over ev'n of these reputed Tales; be it for nothing else but in favour of our English Poets, and Rhetoricians, who by thir Art will know, how to use them judiciously.<sup>27</sup>

And so he set to work with Geoffrey of Monmouth in front of him and the chroncles of Holinshed, Stow and Speed at his elbow.<sup>28</sup>

His excuse seems a lame one. British imaginative writers already had these legends readily available to them in the very same sources that Milton himself used. Spenser had made good use of

<sup>26</sup>*History of the Latin and Germanic Nations* (preface), as quoted by Fritz Stern, *The Varieties of History* (New York: Meridian Books, 1956), p. 57.

<sup>27</sup>Mitford, V:2-3. All following references to the *History of Britain* are to this edition.

<sup>28</sup>Harry Clicksman, "Sources of Milton's *History of Britain*," *University of Wisconsin Studies in Language and Literature*, no. 11, p. 127.

the Brutus myth in Canto X of the *Faerie Queene*. Shakespeare had used the story of King Lear and his daughters, which Milton retells at considerable length,<sup>29</sup> and Milton himself had already used the story of Sabra, or Sabrina, in *Comus*<sup>30</sup> though in a more romantic version than the stark tale of murder for revenge which he tells in the *History*.<sup>31</sup>

Firth was particularly impressed by Milton's scholarly rejection of the Arthurian legends as "trash,"<sup>32</sup> and J. Milton French claims that "Milton's temperament . . . is almost exactly that of the pure scientist. Truth is his aim, and the elimination of untruth is essential."<sup>33</sup> This latter statement hardly consorts with the fact that Milton did, though, it is true, with an apology, repeat the Brutus myths. And though he seems to be more suspicious of them than was Camden, yet he was not as scientific in his approach to them as Camden, who, as we have seen, took the trouble to document the case against them.

The truth of the matter probably was that, whereas there were several fairly reliable sources for the period to which the Arthurian legends belonged, without the Brutus legends there was no account that could be given at all of pre-Roman Britain. Furthermore Milton was probably attracted by the scope given by the legends for an impressive opening to his chronicle and by the literary merit of the tales themselves. The decision to include them was not that of a scientific historian but of a poet who only needed the very slightest justification to proceed.

For the Roman and Saxon periods Milton used as his guides the *De Primordiis* (1613) of Bishop Usher as well as Camden, Holinshed, Speed and Stow,<sup>34</sup> but went beyond them to the now fairly voluminous array of original sources. In his handling of these Milton earned the right to be considered a critical historian, but still hardly earned the epithet of "scientific."

He recognized, quite rightly, that it is with the Roman conquest that the valid written record of English history begins:

By this time, like one who had set out on his way by  
night, and travail'd through a Region of smooth or idle

<sup>29</sup>*History*, pp. 16-19.

<sup>30</sup>Hughes, p. 109, lines 824-858.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.

<sup>32</sup>Firth, p. 124.

<sup>33</sup>"Milton as a Historian," *MLA Publications*, L:470.

<sup>34</sup>Glicksman, pp. 106-07.



Dreams, our History now arrives on the Confines, where day-light and truth meet us with a cleer dawn, representing to our view, though at a far distance, true colours and shapes.<sup>35</sup>

This happy state of affairs does not last for long, and for the post-Roman period and Saxon invasions Milton had to rely chiefly on the Venerable Bede (d. 735), the monk of Jarrow, whose "superstition and monastical affection" shown by his "many legends of visions and miracles" were extremely distasteful to Milton, who could not bring himself to retell any of them. But he fully realized that for the later Saxon period "it will be worse for us destitute of Bede."<sup>36</sup> For then he had to have recourse to a whole crowd of petty monastic chroniclers. "What labour," he complained, "is to be endured turning over volumes of rubbish in the rest, Florence of Worcester, Huntingdon, Simeon of Durham, Hoveden, Matthew of Westminster, and many others of obscurer note with all their monachisms, is a penance to think."<sup>37</sup>

But the situation was not surprising to him. It confirmed his whole view of world history. In *Paradise Lost*, Book XII, the Archangel Michael warns Adam that in the dark ages after the fall of the Roman Empire:

Truth shall retire  
 Bestruck with sland'rous darts, and  
 works of Faith  
 Rarely to be found . . .

And historical discernment was to suffer as well as spiritual discernment. The first was, in fact, an inevitable result of the second:

. . . when the esteem of Science, and liberal study waxes low in the Commonwealth, wee may presume that also there all civil vertue, and worthy action is grown as low to a decline: and then Eloquence, as it were consorted in the same destiny, with the decrease and fall of vertue corrupts also and fades; at least resignes her office of relating to illiterate and frivolous Historians, such as the

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<sup>35</sup>*History*, p. 27.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 172.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*

persons themselves both deserv, and are best pleased with; . . .<sup>38</sup>

So that for British history in the dark ages we must be content with "obscure and blockish chronicles,"<sup>39</sup> "in expression barbarous."<sup>40</sup>

In his treatment of these various monkish chroniclers Milton shows that his promise at the beginning of his history that "I intend not with controversies and quotations to interrupt the smooth course of history"<sup>41</sup> was meant only to apply to the first, legendary, section of the work. He characterizes and criticises these later sources quite fully. He is altogether in accord with the best modern historians when he points out that the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, with all their faults, are the key source for the period: "the chief foundation of our story, the ground and basis upon which the monks in later times gloss and comment at their pleasure;"<sup>42</sup> also when he picks out William of Malmesbury as the most reliable chronicler. His major criticism of Malmesbury, that "he refused, not the authority of ballads for want of better" and inserted stories he confessed "to be sung in old songs not read in warrantable authors,"<sup>43</sup> seems rather hypocritical considering Milton's reasons for retelling the Brutus legends.

Milton is to be complimented for his resource and lack of chauvinism in going to a Danish historian J. J. Pontanus (fl. 1490) for information from the other side on the Danish invasions as also for consulting the Scottish historian George Buchanan (fl. 1582) for facts on the invasions of the Picts and the Scots. Though he found little of use in either source, his use of them is a tribute to his thoroughness in his search for information.

But, although he is a very competent critic of his sources, Milton does not, as the scientific historian of the nineteenth century would be expected to do, present the reader with what he feels to be the truth of the matter under consideration. His favourite method in this later period is to lay out the different accounts from his sources, one after the other. As, for instance, in telling

<sup>38</sup>Hughes, p. 466, lines 535-37; *History*, p. 29.

<sup>39</sup>*History*, p. 172.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 202.

<sup>43</sup>Quoted by Firth, p. 239.

<sup>44</sup>*History*, p. 261.

of the division of England between Canute and Edmund Ironside, he summarizes first Malmesbury's account, then those of Huntingdon, and Brompton, remarking that: "it may seem a wonder that our historians, if they deserve the name, should in a matter so remarkable and so near their own time so much differ."<sup>45</sup> Their failure to agree, in fact, rather contradicted his theory, set forth in *Of Reformation* (1641), that nearness to the event should be a criterion for judging the accuracy of an ecclesiastical historian.<sup>46</sup> After giving the various accounts Milton then explains which version he believes to be correct, and why. But when he is dealing with the visit of Harold Godwinson to the court of William of Normandy he sets down five different accounts and then announces that "so variously are these things reported" that he is unable to decide between them.<sup>47</sup> He lapses here from the role of historian to that of anthologist.

Modern historians have chiefly resorted, in determining the relative accuracy of these early chronicles, to contemporary documentary evidence which is mainly to be found stored in church archives. But Milton scoffed at the men of his age, such as Dodsworth (d. 1654) and Dugale (d. 1686), who were making a first beginning of the scientific study of such documents, who took "pleasure to be all their lifetime raking in the Foundations of old Abbeys and Cathedrals."<sup>48</sup> This was partly due to the fact that he equated such interests with ecclesiastical conservatism, as when, in *Of Reformation*, he sneered at Camden "who canot but love bishops as well as old coins and his much lamented monasteries for antiquity's sake."<sup>49</sup>

Milton nonetheless used Camden extensively for topographical detail: to ascertain the spot where Caesar landed, the ford by which he crossed the Thames, the precise location of the Roman wall; but where Camden failed him Milton did not seek to supply the defect, not caring "to wrinkle the smoothness of history with the rugged names of places unknown better harped at in Camden and other chorographers."<sup>50</sup> The whole Renaissance scientific approach, as advocated by Bodin and Bacon and practiced by Cam-

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 273-75.

<sup>46</sup>Wm. R. Haller, *Liberty and Reformation in the Puritan Revolution* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955), p. 52.

<sup>47</sup>*History*, pp. 289-91.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 172-73.

<sup>49</sup>As quoted by Firth, p. 249.

<sup>50</sup>Firth, p. 241.

den, is neglected by Milton. Neither climate nor astrology is referred to. The nearest he comes to a discussion of racial characteristics is his commonsense rejection of Malmesbury's theory, repeated by Holinshed and Stow, that the English owed their vices to foreigners, having learnt rudeness from the Saxons, daintiness from the Flemings and drunkenness from the Danes, by noting that "these vices are as naturally home-bred here as in any of those countries."<sup>51</sup> He is also sharp enough to note that the omens reported by the chroniclers to have attended the landing of William the Conqueror in Sussex were borrowed directly from ancient tales of Alexander and Caesar.<sup>52</sup> But, although his commonsense and his wide knowledge made him a good critic, he was not a scientific historian in the nineteenth century sense. He was not even sympathetic to the most advanced techniques of historical research of his day.

Milton's theories on the subject of style in historical writing reflect the renaissance rules as they were set down in 1446 by the Italian scholar Guarino for the benefit of a friend who had recently been appointed historiographer to the court at Rimini. They have their origins in the classical rules of rhetoric: the historian's aim must be the conveyance of good example and delight; he must be careful to be absolutely impartial and serve only the cause of truth; a Ciceronian order of narration is recommended — first policy, then deeds, then events, though digressions are tolerated whereby the reader's attention may be secured; persons and places must be faithfully described and detachment is especially urged in describing battles; finally the whole work must be expressed in language so irreproachable that the reader is convinced of the truth of the work by the beauty of its form.<sup>53</sup>

Milton set down his own views in two letters, in 1657, to Henry de Brass who had asked how a historian could best observe Sallust's (45 B.C.) dictum that a historian's expression should be proportional to the deeds related. "This then is my view," he wrote:

that he who would write of worthy deeds worthily must write with mental endowments and experience of affairs not less than were in the doer of the same, so as to be

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<sup>51</sup>*History*, p. 232.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 296-97.

<sup>53</sup>Hays, p. xxvii.

able with equal mind to comprehend and measure even the greatest of them, and when he has comprehended them, to relate them distinctly and gravely in pure and chaste speech.

Like Guarino he stressed the Ciceronian distinction between history and oratory:

. . . ornate style, I do not much care about; for I want a Historian, not an Orator. Nor yet would I have frequent maxims, or criticisms on the translations, prolixly thrown in, lest, by interrupting the thread of event, the Historian should invade the office of the political writer.

He concluded by praising the style of Sallust:

. . . to be able to throw off a great deal in a few words: a thing which I think no one can do without the sharpest judgment and a certain temperance at the same time . . . for conjunction of brevity with abundance, i.e., for the dispatch of much in few words, the chief of the Latins in my judgment is Sallust.<sup>54</sup>

J. S. Bryant, Jr. considers that Milton's real source for these ideas, however, was not so much Sallust as the Roman historian Polybius (150 B.C.), and that in the *Brief History of Muscovia*, written in 1641-42, Milton was endeavouring to follow the Polybian ideals as well as the systematic-scientific method urged by Bacon.<sup>55</sup>

The *History of Muscovia* is indeed brief (only 49 pages in Mitford's edition). As well as a terse political history of the Russian state it contains much detail on the geography, climate, flora and fauna of Russia, all carefully culled from the accounts of travellers. But it is very dull reading and is really more of a reference book than a work of literature.<sup>56</sup>

In his later *History of Britain* Milton was not so careful to keep to the strict rules of style and content. We have already seen that he was not averse to "criticisms . . . prolixly thrown in." We have also seen that he intended to include material for its literary as much as its historical value. The search for themes for his tragic drama or epic is reflected when he tells in some considerable de-

<sup>54</sup>Bryant, pp. 17-19.

<sup>55</sup>*Ibid.*, *passim*.

<sup>56</sup>Mitford, VIII:471-519.

<sup>57</sup>*History*, p. 236.

tail the story of the poisoning of Aelfred, second son of Ethelred the Unready, by his stepmother; of the love affairs of Edgar the Peaceable, which Milton himself notes are "better fitted for a novel than a history."<sup>57</sup> He ignores more than once the rule against the interjection of maxims, as when he remarks with regard to the Britons calling in the Saxons to aid them against the invading Picts and Scots: "so much do men through impatience count ever that the heaviest which they bear at present, and to remove the evil which they suffer, care not to pull on a greater; as if variety and change in evil also were acceptable."<sup>58</sup> There are many other diversions from the strict course of history in the work, notably on the subject of rule by women which Milton considered as monstrous as had John Knox. The warrior queen Boadicea, a national heroine in most British histories, is portrayed by Milton as a virago, "a distracted woman with as mad a crew at her heels."<sup>59</sup> There are also, of course, numerous diatribes against monks and other manifestations of the dark days of popery which reveal an attitude to the medieval church similar to that of the eighteenth century philosophers of the enlightenment who regarded it as the cause of, not the one remaining light in, the dark ages.

It is these comments, asides, and comparisons that make the *History of Britain* readable, whereas the *History of Muscovia* is a dull recitation of facts. Firth, who belonged to a period in historiography which rejected the idea of history as literature (and the more extreme representatives of which despised such great and eminently readable, if occasionally wrong, historians as Carlyle and Macaulay as "charlatans,")<sup>60</sup> was not too happy about this element in Milton's work, though he was possessed of too great taste to condemn it outright.<sup>61</sup>

The fact is that Milton was faced with the essential dilemma of the renaissance theories of historical style: the conflict between the avowed end of conveying good example and delight and the stipulated means - an impartial, uncoloured narration of fact. But there is a happy medium between the horns of this dilemma and this, it would seem, Milton was fairly successful in finding. He does, after the first legendary period, give a fairly accurate historical account. His actual language achieves for the most part

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 111.

<sup>59</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>60</sup>Stern, p. 227.

<sup>61</sup>Firth, pp. 232, 246-54.

the classical ideal of elegant brevity - saying much in little. In his descriptions of situations, for example, we find such terse summaries as this on the results of the Roman conquest: "of the Romans we have cause to say not much worse than that they beat us into civility." It is likewise in his descriptions of persons as when we find Carvasius described as usurping the government because he "was grown at length too great a delinquent to be less than an emperor."<sup>62</sup> Glicksman testifies that Milton in his translations of the classical Latin historians has wonderfully recaptured the flavour of the originals.<sup>63</sup> But on those occasions, in the later books, when he is reduced to a mere recital of kings and battles, his style becomes comparable to his own description of that of Bede's history with "his many legends of Visions and Miracles" removed: "a Calendar rather than a History."<sup>64</sup> Happily, as we have seen, he is usually prepared to depart from his own strict standards and do what Guarino had conceded to be necessary - make digressions "whereby the reader's attention my be secured."<sup>65</sup>

Besides giving delight Milton's *History* also seeks to achieve that other avowed end of renaissance historiography, conveying good example, which is also irreconcilable with the strict standards of nineteenth century scientific history. The later nineteenth century view that the sole aim of history was to find out "what actually happened" was essentially both futile and sterile. For we can never know all that actually happened, or even very much of what actually happened, in the past. Neither can we in the twentieth century, nor could Ranke in the nineteenth century, ever fully appreciate and comprehend what little we know or suspect happened in the eleventh century precisely as an eleventh century man did. It is generally considered today that the object of history, as distinct from antiquarianism, is to find in the past what is significant for us now, and each succeeding generation will need to take a new look at the past, from a new angle, to find the "good example" sought by the renaissance historians.

If Milton began his *History of Britain* merely to provide old

<sup>62</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 246.

<sup>63</sup>*Passim*.

<sup>64</sup>*History*, pp. 171-72.

<sup>65</sup>The problem remains as to why Milton, writing to de Brass in 1657, should have laid down rules which he himself had followed scrupulously in his *History of Muscovia* (1641) but departed from considerably in his *History of Britain* (1646-60). Perhaps he felt that de Brass's style needed strict disciplining.

plots for contemporary writers, that was not his aim at the end. He found in the events of English history from 45 A.D. to 1066 a series of salutary lessons for mid-seventeenth century Englishmen. What was to be feared was the spiritual and moral decay of society, which would, inevitably, ultimately lead to disaster. This could be clearly seen, Milton felt, in the conquest of the ancient Britons by the Romans, the conquest of the Romano-Britons by the Anglo-Saxons, and conquest of the Anglo-Saxons firstly by the Danes and finally by the Normans.

It is important at this stage to remember the precise chronological background of the *History*. The first three books, dealing with the legendary pre-history, the Roman period and the Saxon invasions, were evidently written between 1646 and 1648 after the pamphlets on divorce and after the close of the first civil war. For it is in the introduction to Book III, which tells of the Saxon invasions, that Milton compares the Romano-Briton's demoralization at that time with the state of Englishmen in 1647-48, when after having heroically thrown off the yoke of Stuart tyranny, they yet lacked the fortitude to establish a free commonwealth, being merely reduced "after many labours, much bloodshed and vast expense to ridiculous frustration."<sup>66</sup>

. . . The leading nation to freedom from the Empire, they seemed a while to bestir them with a shew of diligence in their new affairs, some secretly aspiring to rule, others adoring the name of liberty, yet so soon as they felt by proof the weight of what it was to govern well themselves, and what was wanting within them, not stomach or the love of license, but the wisdom the virtue the labour, to use and maintain true libertie they soon remitted their heat and shrunk more wretchedly under the burden of their owne libertie, than before under a foren yoke.<sup>67</sup>

Milton must have been sorry then, but not too surprised, when, just as the Britons had bowed to Saxon domination, the Englishmen of the Commonwealth, having proved unworthy of liberty, ignored his plea in *The Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth* (1660) and brought back the Stuarts.

Milton wrote the fourth and fifth books in 1648-49 and the last two sometime between 1655 and 1660.<sup>68</sup> When the work was

<sup>66</sup>*History*, p. 95.

<sup>67</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>68</sup>Firth, p. 229.



finally published in 1670 the comparison with the Commonwealth at the beginning of Book III was omitted. It was first published separately in 1681, a period of high conservative reaction. But the lessons remained. The ninth century Saxons, "full as wicked as the Britons were at their arrival, "fell before the Danes because it was God's purpose "to punish our instrumental punishers, though now Christians, by other heathen, according to His divine retaliation, invasion for invasion, spoil for spoil, destruction for destruction." Because "when God hath decreed servitude on a sinful nation, fitted by their own vices for no condition but servile, all estates of government are alike unable to avoid it." The same applied to the Norman conquest, and it only remained for Milton to bring the moral up to date for 1670 in a closing sentence:

If these were the causes of such misery and thralldom to our ancestors, with what better close can be concluded than here in fit season to remember this age in the midst of her security, to fear from like vices, without amendment, the revolution of like calamities.<sup>69</sup>

This view of the Norman conquest as being due to the degeneracy of the Anglo-Saxon character was never very popular, though it appears frequently down to the time of Carlyle, who denounced the Saxons as

a gluttonous race of Jutes and Angles capable of no grand combination; lumbering about in pot-bellied equanimity; not dreaming of heroic toil and silence and endurance such as leads to the high places of this universe, and the golden mountain tops where dwell the spirits of the dawn.<sup>70</sup>

Far more popular was the traditional Whig view of the Saxons as good, Protestant democrats who, in 1066, were brought quite undeservedly under the yoke of tyranny and popery.

In his portrayal of a series of conquerors becoming in their turn the conquered there is an implied suggestion of a cyclic theory of history (which is reinforced by the phrase "revolution of like calamities" in the final sentence) such as has been made popular in our own age by Arnold Toynbee and others. Such a theory is, of course, basically pessimistic. One could say

<sup>69</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 256-57.

<sup>70</sup>D. C. Douglas, *The Norman Conquest and British Historians* (Glasgow University Press, 1946), pp. 11-12.

that Milton sees each of the conquests as a *felix culpa* essential for the ultimate happiness of the English nation. The repetitive element would seem to refute such a view unless a halt is to be put to the process somewhere. Perhaps Milton intended that his *History* should point the way to eventual redemption. In *The Reason of Church Government*, in 1643, he had written:

He that hath read with judgment of nations and common-wealths . . . will readily agree that the flourishing and decaying of all civil societies, all the moments and turnings of human occasions are moved to and fro as upon the axle discipline.<sup>71</sup>

Did he hope that his *History* might inspire Englishmen to that self-discipline which would ensure everlasting prosperity? Like Bodin he was a great believer in the efficacy of education to cure social ills.<sup>72</sup>

We have compared Milton in the realm of historiography with historians of the renaissance, his own age, the nineteenth century and the modern age. But the theme of his *History* is essentially how the Hand of God is at work in the affairs of men - as in *Paradise Lost*, to "justify the ways of God to men." This sort of history has a very ancient tradition behind it going back to the historical portions of the *Old Testament* and earlier. But its last great manifestation was in the historical writings of those medieval monkish chroniclers whom, ironically, Milton so despised. He was, of course, a man of the seventeenth century - a century in which the last elements of the medieval age were passing away and the first elements of the modern age, springing out of the renaissance, were being established. In form and style the *History of Britain* belongs to the renaissance, but its theme is medieval. M. S. Larson claims for Milton that he "was a powerful force in disintegrating medievalism and all it stands for, and in bringing about the modern era."<sup>73</sup> Milton was a Puritan, and Larson's claim for him could be made for the role of Puritanism itself in the seventeenth century. But, paradoxically, there is much in the Puritan philosophy that is akin to medieval Christian philosophy, especially with regard to the relationship between God and human societies. The

<sup>71</sup>Hughes, p. 642.

<sup>72</sup>Bodin, pp. 45-46. For Milton's views see his essay *Of Education*, Hughes, p. 636 *et passim*.

<sup>73</sup>M. A. Larson, *The Modernity of Milton* (Chicago: University Press, 1927), quoted on the dustjacket.

difference between the two philosophies is mostly with regard to the relationship between God and individuals. Perhaps this is why "Milton the modern" in his philosophy of history seems to be a medieval man: